



U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee

AIR Written Testimony on K-12 School Turnaround Models

Prepared by

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The American Institutes for Research[®] (AIR) is pleased to offer this testimony on school turnaround models. AIR has conducted or is currently conducting major studies of school turnaround under contract to the U.S. Department of Education (ED), including *Design Options for Turning Around Low Performing Schools* (2008), the *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practice Guide* (2008), *Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study* (2010), *Identifying Potentially Successful Approaches to Turning Around Chronically Low Performing Schools* (ongoing since 2009), and the *Study of School Turnaround* (ongoing since 2009). These studies and related work inform the testimony below.

In the following written testimony, we provide a brief overview of the intervention models outlined in final rules for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) followed by a summary of research evidence on improving chronically low-performing schools. Our key points are the following:

1. The research base supporting each of the four intervention models is mixed. Each has supporting evidence and evidence about conditions that correspond to positive effects.
2. The intervention models as described are likely to include *practices* that have some support in research on school improvement. These include: changing principals, changing curriculum and instruction, providing flexibility, ensuring job-embedded professional development, providing social-emotional supports, and encouraging quick wins.
3. Turning around chronically low-performing schools is fraught with challenges that can easily undermine success. These challenges include: leadership turnover, limited district and state capacity, a lack of high-caliber teachers, and matching the intervention practices to school needs. Case studies provide some examples of how schools have overcome these challenges.
4. The research indicates that the quality and level of implementation is critical to successful school improvement. How the practices are implemented, their coherence, and their fit with school needs may spell the difference between success and failure.

ARRA Intervention Models: Evidence for the Models and Key Components

Under the ARRA, the U.S. Department of Education has identified four school intervention models for chronically underperforming schools: Turnaround, Restart, Closure, and Transformation.

- **Turnaround** involves changing many core elements of the school: replacing the principal and up to 50% of teachers, changing instruction, providing job-embedded professional development, using data to inform instruction, expanding learning time, providing wraparound services, changing the governance structure, and providing additional flexibility to the school. Research on whole school reform suggests that bringing together a suite of changes to these aspects of the school can improve student learning, but the quality of the implementation and exact nature of the programs (e.g., *which* curricula, the strength of the research base, the fit with school needs) are critical.¹
- **Restart** involves closing the school and reopening it under new management (an education or charter management organization). The premise is that these organizations will have the efficiency and flexibility to make important and necessary changes in the school. Anecdotal indicators suggest some success for chronically low-performing schools that reopen as *charters*.² However, most of the evidence focuses on charter schools in general, not chronically low-performing schools that have closed and reopened as charters. The evidence of charters' effects on achievement is mixed, with significant gains in some but not all cases.³

Research evidence concerning charter schools run by *Education Management Organizations* (EMOs), a subset of all charters, is likewise mixed. Some evidence shows that schools run by EMOs have significantly higher achievement gains than non-EMO charter and public schools, but the gains are not large enough to overcome initial achievement gaps.⁴ Some studies have found cases in which EMO-managed schools made gains, although at a slower pace than non-EMO schools.⁵ A critical review of seven widely implemented EMOs that operate in about 350 schools found that one model had moderate evidence of positive effects on student achievement (Edison Schools), and six models either had no strong studies or no studies at all.⁶ EMOs do seem effective at streamlining school administration, creating more effective professional development, setting and maintaining clear standards, establishing a consistent instructional approach, improving facilities, and demonstrating similar hallmarks of well-functioning schools. Note that most of the research did not look specifically at chronically low-performing schools that had closed and reopened as charters, but at EMOs more broadly.⁷

- **Closure** involves closing the school and sending students to other existing schools; the intent is to provide different—and better—educational experiences for the students. A recent study of closure indicated that it may improve student achievement if students end up in higher achieving schools. However, a number of implementation factors (e.g., neighborhood schools tend to be of the same low quality, and transportation to higher achieving schools is difficult; turmoil around

the transition can affect learning) make it difficult to realize these effects consistently.⁸ A recent paper on how and why four major districts (Denver, Chicago, Hartford, and Pittsburgh) closed failing schools provides some suggestions on how to improve the implementation of this option.⁹ For example, schools and districts can offer additional support during the transition such as clarifying the new principal's role, helping students and families understand and follow through on the school change, and providing staff with clear information on next steps. Districts also should ensure that the public and school board are knowledgeable about and supportive of the effort. Critically, a supply of higher performing school options needs to be readily available to the students.

- **Transformation** is similar to the turnaround model, but with more emphasis on keeping the existing teachers and holding them accountable for student learning through new teacher evaluation systems that use student growth as a measure of performance. The closest related research is on teacher incentive programs, which reward teachers for students' growth. The literature base on the effectiveness of teacher incentive programs is still developing. A limited number of rigorous studies examine correlations and the implementation of specific programs—with mixed or positive results—but more studies are underway.¹⁰

Although the models themselves are relatively new and have limited rigorous research, the strategies that are part of the models build on earlier research. The mechanisms may differ, but all four models imply changing students' learning experiences by one or a combination of practices, including replacing staff, providing staff with more job-embedded professional development, changing curriculum and instruction, and providing more flexibility at the school level (sometimes to the principal and sometimes to the management organization). The turnaround and transformation models involve wraparound services to meet students' nonacademic needs that affect their potential to learn.

- **Changing staff.** There is case study support for the approach of changing at least some staff—especially principals—to improve schools. Changing staff, especially the principal, also can send a strong message to the school and community that the school will be changing and the status quo is no longer acceptable. According to the recent Institute for Education Sciences practice guide on turning around chronically low-performing schools, case studies of turnaround schools indicate that effective turnaround schools (e.g., schools that dramatically improve student achievement quickly) use turnaround principals.¹¹ Often these are new principals, selected for leadership qualities common to turnaround leaders in education and other sectors (e.g., they thrive on challenge, they can stay focused on goals and motivate others towards those goals). Sometimes, existing principals can lead schools to turnaround, but these principals generally have turnaround-specific training and make a visible break from their previous leadership strategies. Consistently, turnaround principals become much more involved in classroom instruction and make very public commitments to change the school and student learning.

Case studies also provide evidence that successful turnaround schools evaluate and selectively prune their instructional staff. Indeed, wholesale staff replacement

is not always warranted. Successful turnaround schools tend to build a committed staff by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the existing staff vis-à-vis the schools' reform strategies; redeploying or counseling out staff who are not functioning effectively, and purposefully selecting staff who have the key qualifications and a commitment to the reform effort.

- **Embedded professional development.** Decades of research support the premise that embedded professional development is more effective at changing teachers' instruction than traditional workshops. Further, content-focused professional development may be especially effective. However, rigorous effectiveness studies have yet to prove that embedded professional development improves student achievement. Researchers suggest that it may take longer for the effect to filter down to the student level.¹²
- **Changing curriculum and instruction.** Descriptive research on effective schools and organizations consistently finds that instruction (including curriculum)¹³ matters most, and other changes (e.g., leadership, resources) also relate to student achievement when they facilitate changes in instruction.¹⁴ The School Turnaround Practice Guide reported that successful turnaround schools consistently focused on (a) using data to improve instruction and (b) involving teachers in aligning the curriculum to the state standards. Successful turnaround schools used data to shape and track progress toward school goals, identify needs for individualized teacher professional development, and identify needs for reteaching individual students specific content and skills. These schools also involve teachers in aligning the curriculum, which seems to help teachers in the case study schools be more reflective concerning their own instruction.
- **Providing more flexibility at the school level.** In their study of high-poverty, high-performing schools, Mass Insight found benefits to providing chronically low-performing schools with the flexibility to enact changes to improve the school.¹⁵ Specifically, allowing schools more control over staffing and budget may enable them to focus human and financial resources where these are most needed.
- **Social emotional supports.** Students who attend chronically low-performing schools often have many nonacademic needs that interfere with their ability to engage fully with instruction.^{16, 17} Research supports a three-tiered approach in which students at the highest levels of need receive intensive services, such as wraparound; students who experience risk factors for school failure receive targeted services; and universal interventions are aimed at improving safety, relationships, and school climate.^{18, 19, 20}
- **Quick wins.** Although not mentioned in ED's four school intervention models, one further strategy frequently emerges in the cases of successful turnaround schools: quick wins. These schools consistently make one or a very few visible improvements early in the reform process, thus motivating staff around the reform effort. Quick wins are very focused accomplishments within the first weeks of reform to propel the reform forward; turnaround in achievement generally requires one to three years of sustained efforts.

Implementation and Sustainability Challenges

Turning around chronically low-performing schools is fraught with challenges that can hinder effective implementation. Moreover, many schools have struggled to sustain high achievement levels after initial gains. Some implementation and sustainability issues that consistently appear in the research on turning around low-performing schools include the following:

- **Matching need and approach.** Case study research shows that no single intervention consistently works in every case and that strategies that enable one school to improve may not succeed elsewhere.²¹ In part, this may be a result of the unique challenges and context for each school. A recent study of 11 low-performing schools found that matching the approach and implementation strategy to the school is critical for success.²²
- **Few high-caliber teachers.** If chronically low-performing schools are to fill their classrooms with well-qualified staff, they need to recruit and retain such teachers. However, some districts are unable to attract sufficient numbers of teachers, particularly in high-need subjects and specialties.²³ Thus, turnaround activities may have to be accompanied by systemic efforts to recruit and retain a more qualified teacher workforce.
- **Lack of capacity at the district or state level.** One of the underlying premises of accountability is that low-performing schools lack the capacity to improve on their own, and can do so only with external support, often provided by the district or state. However, districts and states themselves face capacity challenges with regard to expertise, the number of available staff, funding, or technology that limit the extent to which they can facilitate change efforts.²⁴
- **Leadership turnover.** Too often, it is difficult for schools to sustain improvement efforts (and resulting gains) when leadership changes.²⁵ Unless a transition is carefully planned, the departing principal may leave a vacuum in terms of reform expertise, vision, networks, and communication skills. Similarly, substantial teacher turnover can contribute to an environment in which professional learning and staff capacity cannot grow.
- **Sustainability.** Studies of turnaround schools, as well as anecdotal evidence collected from hundreds of turnaround leaders, consistently show challenges in maintaining and building on the early successes.²⁶ The Achieving Dramatic School Improvement study found substantial “bounce” in test scores of schools that initially appeared to be turnaround successes—after years of failing to meet standards, they might meet standards one year, only to fail the next. Some schools lost additional funding when they met state standards, and had to abandon the extended-learning-time programs that had helped them raise student achievement.

In summary, turning around chronically low-performing schools and sustaining improvement strategies are difficult, but not impossible. Research provides evidence about which *practices* are evident in turnaround schools, and these practices can be included in the intervention models required by ARRA funding programs. However, the research base on the ARRA intervention models themselves is mixed, at best.

Furthermore, how the practices are selected and implemented matters greatly. An effective practice can be implemented poorly, and promising practices may be mismatched with a school's most pressing challenges, thus not yielding desired results. The congruence and coherence of change practices may make the difference between success and failure.

About AIR

Established in 1946, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., the American Institutes for Research (AIR) is a nonpartisan not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of health, education and workforce productivity. For more information, visit www.air.org.

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